

CHERNOV'S CHOICE

Rock musicians are among those who protest the trial of imprisoned businessman and Putin opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was given another prison sentence in December, as politically motivated and orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Last week, Khodorkovsky's supporters got a response from 55 "representatives of the public" who signed an open letter against those who criticized the trial. The letter claimed that "certain activists" manipulated public opinion and put "unprecedented" pressure on the justice system.

Speaking to The St. Petersburg Times, Vasily Shumov of the rock group Center described the letter as a "Soviet atavism," reminiscent of open letters against dissident authors published in Soviet newspapers.

Most of the signatories were unknown, but one sent waves throughout the music scene and artistic community: **Sergei Bugayev**, also known as Afrika. Bugayev was an artist and musician who was active in Leningrad during the 1980s rock explosion. He appeared with Aquarium's Boris Grebenshchikov, Kino and the late Sergei Kuryokhin's Pop Mechanics, and also starred in Sergei Solovyov's perestroika film "Assa" alongside Kino's late frontman Viktor Tsoi.

Bugayev's signature probably did not come as so much of a surprise to anyone who had followed his recent public movements. In 2009, he was seen at Seliger camp, lecturing the Kremlin-backed youth organization Nashi, and last year slammed DDT's Yury Shevchuk for his argument with Putin over human rights and freedoms in Russia.

In an op-ed piece in Izvestia newspaper this week, Bugayev appeared to be a fully-fledged Putinist. "Criticism of the state through art at this stage is a harmful thing," he said.

"People should understand that all the conquests of freedom are still so unstable that there is a risk of sliding back into totalitarianism. We are not the strong superpower that the U.S.S.R. was. Russia may not survive. Why provoke matters?"

In the same interview, Bugayev mentioned that he was planning to cooperate with the state.

"Cooperating" with the state can be quite profitable, as a recent controversy has shown. It emerged at the weekend that the proceeds of a charity event headlined by **Vladimir Putin**, who famously sang "Blueberry Hill," and featuring Western stars from Paul Anka to Sharon Stone and Mickey Rourke were not given to sick children and hospitals as announced, but "disappeared." (See story, page 2).

According to Agence France Presse, the Kremlin said that it had nothing to do with the charity and that it was the Federatsiya Foundation that was in charge, while a spokeswoman for the foundation — with the improbable sounding name Kristina Snickers — said that Federatsiya did not deal with the money, and does not even have a bank account.

— By Sergey Chernov

History repeating

Vasily Shumov is preparing to take the world of Russian music by storm — again.

By Sergey Chernov
THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

Musician and artist Vasily Shumov, whose group Center was one of the leading bands of the 1980s Russian rock revolution, remains innovative and subversive at a time when many of his peers appear to have become tired and lost touch.

Although he spent almost two decades away from Russia, returning for an occasional visit to showcase albums, his work has remained closely connected to what is happening in Russia and touches on issues that some prefer to avoid.

Having returned from Los Angeles, where he had been based since 1990, Shumov has reformed Center with the musicians that he played with in the band's early years and is set to attempt to bring back to Russian music and art what it has lost since the 1980s explosion — content.

Since 2009, Shumov has been producing an ongoing project called Soderzhaniye (Content) consisting of collaborations with various Russian musicians that deal with some of the country's most pressing issues, ranging from corruption to poverty, censorship, lawlessness and pensioners' problems. The second album in the Soderzhaniye series came out and was showcased with a concert in Moscow last week.

Speaking to The St. Petersburg Times last week, Shumov said he went to Moscow in December 2008 to present Center's new American album, the Los Angeles-recorded "The Past Has No Future" (U Proshlogo Net Budushchego), but his stay turned out to be longer than he expected.

"I found myself in Moscow on New Year's Eve for the first time in perhaps 20 years, and it so happened that I was near the television for New Year's Eve 2008-2009 and watched all the music programs they showed during the night," he said.

"Because I had not been here for a long time, I had no idea who the artists were who were singing, clinking glasses and throwing confetti; I thought they were local artists, television stars, but something moved in me, some energy, I didn't know then what it was. Then Old New Year is celebrated in this country after a while, and once again, I found myself in front of the television, and they repeated them all, all those New Year music programs. I felt that energy again. I realized that all of this crowd that sings, dances, jokes and kisses one other, they have one thing in common. For all their veneer and glamour, they have no content inside; they're totally empty songs and empty people. No content."

Inspired by his reaction to Russian New Year music shows, Shumov formulated a theory that art will regain content that it has lost.

"My concept is that during the entire 20th century, art worked with form — all those 'isms' starting with Dadaism; the entire 20th century represented 'isms,'" he said.

"When ideas ran out, postmodernism appeared, when artists began to work with pre-existing work and rework them in a new way. It is all work with form. But content has stepped aside from artworks, and form has reached the absolute. In my view, you can't make anything new anymore by working with form, because proper artwork should always have a content aspect, which has disappeared. So I think that art, including music, will be imbued with content during the next ten years."

With two albums already released, the Soderzhaniye project is planned to



Shumov has moved back to Russia after almost 20 years spent abroad.

total ten albums. "There is a conceptual reason, because the word 'Soderzhaniye' is made up of ten letters [in Cyrillic] and we have ten guitar silhouettes in our logo," Shumov said.

"The first few albums are supposed to draw attention to this idea — that it would be good to fill Russian rock and Russian art in general with content. So that a person who gets up on stage could be asked, 'Why have you come on stage? Why are you standing there? Do you have anything to say? Or do you just want us to see how you dance, what dance or vocal lessons you have taken, what haircut you've got or what boutique you bought your clothes in?'"

"I'd like to stress that Soderzhaniye is a purely Russian project, because from a Russian musician, people expect sincerity, rather than virtuosity or whatever. Why do they still like [Vladimir] Vysotsky or Maik Naumenko? Because [they wrote] kind of confessional songs that resonated in the souls of the Russian people. They had honest songs; that's a good example of content."

The project's opening album, which came out in February 2010, was presented live in July that year with a nearly ten-hour outdoor music event, Soderzhaniye Live, held as part of the Pilorama festival at Perm-36, the former Soviet political labor camp that is the only one to have been turned into a museum. The album and live event featured Center, Televizor and Barto, among others.

Shumov, whose band Center made its live debut during Moscow's Olympic Games in 1980, compares present-day Russia to the pre-perestroika Soviet Union, both in music and life in general.

"If anybody cares to recall, in the U.S.S.R. in the 1970s, which are now known as the 'stagnation period,' there were an unbelievable number of servile pop bands who sang songs by Soviet composers about the Komso-

mol, major Soviet construction projects and love," he said.

"It is reminiscent of the 2000s, because they were also characterized by stagnation. Musicians frittered themselves away playing corporate parties, making a buck here, a buck there. They turned into servants of the system, just as 1970s pop bands were in the U.S.S.R. They became creatively dead.

"Then, all of a sudden, everything started to happen in the early 1980s, when bands such as Zoopark, Kino and Center emerged who had nothing to do with the past generations of servile pop musicians.

"I feel like we are living in a kind of 1981 now — when something has started to happen in music, and even in all other spheres."

Last month, Shumov wrote a song called "I Feel Good" (Mne Khorosho), a bitter satire on musicians who are comfortable with the current situation in Russia.

He said the song was a reaction to RenTV television channel's January program "Notes of Protests" that dealt with the growing protest movement in Russian music. As well as socially conscious musicians such as Shumov, Televizor's Mikhail Borzykin and DDT's Yury Shevchuk, the channel spoke to artists who back the authorities.

Making the point that Russians live well under the current political regime, Chaif's Vladimir Shakhurin said that he was able to go on vacation with his family to Italy, where he rents a car and drives across the country. Mashina Vremeni's Andrei Makarevich said that the root of problems in Russia were, in reality, the Russian people and the kind of country it was, rather than the Kremlin. Ivanushki International's Kirill Andreyev went as far as to suggest that those who were not satisfied with things should leave the country, because they were not patriots.

All these quotes were incorporated in Shumov's song sung from the perspective of an artist who is happy with everything.

"They are simply lackeys, the ordinary driving belts of this system, which can be called either post-Soviet or neo-Soviet," Shumov said.

"They say that rock music is over, that we should all stop resisting and live happily, and that Russia's problems come not from the authorities but from its own people. That's how they justify their form of existence as lackeys and toadies.

"It's not only about musicians, but about all the people who feel good now, who are satisfied with everything and don't want anything changed, God forbid. Who have adapted themselves to this kind of system."

Shumov is critical of President Dmitry Medvedev's televised meetings with rock musicians, including Makarevich and Shakhurin, and U2's Bono.

"I don't know what's in it for them, what the point is and what result it leads to," he said.

"To say that somebody loves rock music? Will anybody feel better because of that? We have no free elections in this country. All these people were 'elected' or rather appointed at faked elections, became 'successors' and then it turns out that they love rock music. Perhaps Gaddafi likes some kinds of music too, but now he is bombing his own people. He even invited somebody to play a concert for him."

Unlike in the Soviet Union, rock bands may not be banned, but censorship has returned and taken an even nastier, more secretive form in today's Russia, according to Shumov.

"It is blossoming now; it exists in some secret blacklists, some hints that you can't speak about certain things, that you can't criticize Putin," he said.

"The face of the system is [television talk show host Vladimir] Pozner. He says 'I accept the rules of the game,' that 'there are certain things I can't speak about in my program,' that 'there are certain people that I can't invite to appear on my program, because a blacklist exists that I can't tell you about.'

"So a rotten system is blossoming again due to the Pozners. If the Americans have [journalism hero] Hunter S. Thompson, the Russians have Pozner. The embodiment of servility, decay and complete spiritual failure."

Reacting to Shevchuk's televised argument with Putin last year, as well as a high-profile concert in defense of the Khimki forest that the authorities attempted to ban in Moscow, and Noize MC's confrontation with the police in Volgograd that landed the rapper in prison for ten days, mainstream Russian media outlets have reported on the emergence of a "fashion" or "trend" for protest songs. Shumov disagreed.

"If you live in Moscow, you don't need any outside motivation to start writing protest songs," he said.

"You drive across Moscow and you are simply driven off the road like some sort of louse, because some big shot is being driven along the road. You should squeeze up against the roadside and wait for hours until some little tsar passes by. Nobody cares if you have an important meeting or anything else, and that applies to thousands of people.

"Ask people in Egypt, Libya or Tunisia, what kind of fashion do they have there now? Go ask Egyptians and Libyans why they are rioting there. Ask that vegetable seller who set himself on fire in Tunisia. What was his motivation? Who provoked him?"

Soderzhaniye 2 is out now on Soyuz record label.